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ABSTRACT

In January 2002, Ireland's minister of state announced the establishment of the National Adult Learning Council to take effect in March 2002. One of the council's priorities will be to establish local adult learning boards (LALBs) to oversee development and delivery of adult education. An Irish government white paper recommended that LALBs' operation be based on the following principles: area-based planning; social inclusion; access, quality, relevance, and progression; partnership; integration; information; flexibility; voluntary effort; and devolved authority. The white paper also recommended that LALBs have the authority to make decisions on the deployment of resources within each region with regard to designated programs within the further education sector in accordance with existing national standards prescribed by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, standards and guidelines for good practice, national policies, and Ireland's existing framework for accountability and provision. Plans call for LALBs to include representatives of a variety of stakeholders, including the following: the community; training agencies; schools; Ireland's teachers' union; learners; employers; adult literacy services, library services; health boards; institutes of technology, and universities. LALBs will be required to report annually to Ireland's National Adult Learning Council and develop and follow plans with clearly defined targets and mechanisms of qualitative evaluation. (Contains 6 references.) (MN)

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AONTAS

Local Structures in Adult Education

A Discussion Paper

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SETTING THE CONTEXT

One of the main planks of AONTAS's lobbying over the past 30 years has been a call for the establishment of effective national and local structures to support and service the development of the adult education sector. AONTAS has continually stressed the importance of these structures being locally responsive within a framework of national objectives and agreed targets. The lack of such unifying structures has meant that adult and community education has developed in an ad-hoc manner without an over-arching framework to guide its expansion along agreed national and local strategies. This has inevitably led to duplication of services, competition for resources, and a lack of connection between the formal and non-formal adult education organisations and providers.

Attempts have been made by various governments to address the issues of the sector, in particular with the appointment of two advisory bodies on Adult Education in 1969 and 1981 respectively. Both of these advisory bodies produced reports which made recommendations featuring the establishment of national and local structures to support adult education provision. Neither was successful in having its recommendations fully implemented.

The Murphy Report

The Committee on Adult Education submitted its report, *Adult Education in Ireland* (known as the *Murphy Report*), to the Minister for Education in November 1973. This report emphasised that "the greatest single need of adult education in Ireland, to-day, is a definite system, framework and organisation within which it can function, develop and give satisfaction" (p 105). The *Murphy Report* recommended structures at both national and county level. The recommended national structure consisted of a statutory component, delivered by an Adult Education Section under the Department of Education, and a voluntary component, delivered by AONTAS as the national counselling and advisory body to the Minister for Education (pp 110-112).

At local level, the *Murphy Report* recommended the establishment of County Education Committees as local statutory bodies overseeing all the education provision (preschool, primary, post-primary and adult) within a county. The County Education Committees would each be informed by various local advisory committees, including an Adult Education Advisory Committee (p 114). The *Report* specified the membership of the County Education Committees as:

- One-third of the total from elected representatives of the county;
- One-third of the total representatives of all school managers and teachers;
- One-third of the total representatives of voluntary bodies selected by the local authority from an electoral panel representing: commerce, industry, tourism, agriculture and fishing, churches, trade unions, parents, community councils and cultural groups.

The County Librarian and Agricultural Officer would serve on the County Education Committees *ex-officio* (p 114). Interestingly, the *Murphy Report* does not specify a membership for the Adult Education Advisory Committees, stating that "this advisory committee would be representative of all local adult education and community groups. The size and structure of the advisory committee should be determined at local level but it should include some members of the County Education Committee" (p 116).

Two main recommendations from the *Murphy Report* were implemented: in 1979, Adult Education Organisers were appointed to VECs to develop Adult Education services at local level, and in 1980 the Department of Education established its Adult Education Section.

The Kenny Report

The Commission on Adult Education submitted its report, *Lifelong Learning* (known as the *Kenny Report*), to the Minister for Education in May 1984. The *Kenny Report* stated that "a structure at national and local level is required so that the economic and social benefits for all people can be availed of to the fullest extent and the available resources can be used efficiently and effectively within a democratic framework" (p 120). At national level, the *Report* recommended the establishment by statute of a National Council for Adult Education consisting of 15 members, seven of whom, plus the Chair, would be appointed by the Minister, and seven of whom would be elected from the local Adult Education Boards (pp 135-136).

At local level, the *Kenny Report* recommended the establishment of County Adult Education Boards to be established under the Vocational Education Act 1930 as statutory sub-committees of the VECs. The Report identifies two principles guiding the establishment of these Boards:

- In their composition they should be representative of those bodies in each area, statutory and otherwise, concerned with the provision of adult education.
- They should be as autonomous as possible. An essential element of this autonomy would be the authority to disburse their own funds once they had made the case for, and had been allocated, those funds (p 129).

The Adult Education Boards would not have more than 15 members, consisting of:

- 2 members nominated by the VEC;
- 1 member nominated by ACOT (An Chomhairle Oiliúna Talmhaíochta);
- 1 member nominated by the Local Statutory Library Authority;
- 1 member nominated by AnCO (An Chomhairle Oiliúna);
- 7 members nominated by representatives of bodies other than the VEC with an involvement in adult education in the County or County Borough area;
- 1-3 members co-opted from bodies not already represented (p 131).

The Report recommended that a conference of delegates from bodies with an involvement in adult education would be convened annually within each board area which would serve as an annual consultative assembly and as the electoral mechanism for the group of seven in the membership of the Board (p 131).

In response to the recommendations of the *Kenny Report*, the VECs established Adult Education Boards in 1984 on an *ad hoc* rather than statutory basis. The recommendation for the National Council for Adult Education was not implemented.

Although there have been significant increases in the provision of Adult and Community Education and Government funding for specific programmes since 1984, there have been no further developments in the structural framework under which adult education operates.

The White Paper on Adult Education

The publication of the Green Paper, *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning* (1998), and the subsequent White Paper, *Learning for Life* (2000), marked the State's "adoption of lifelong learning as the governing principle of educational policy" (White Paper, p 12). Launching the White Paper in August 2000 the Minister of State, Mr. Willie O' Dea described adult education as "the last area of mass education to be developed in Ireland". The challenge in deciding on a recommended national and local structure was "one of creating a framework for the sector which accords it a higher level of priority in mainstream provision while ensuring innovation, flexibility, responsiveness and learner-centred commitment" (p 184).

The White Paper noted that the lack of progress in establishing a national statutory body with responsibility for Adult Education "is a serious omission that now needs to be addressed as a priority" (p 185). It recommended the establishment of the National Adult Learning Council (NALC), with a membership of representatives of the social partnership and statutory bodies, to be responsible for the "critical areas of co-ordination, liaison, policy advice, monitoring, quality, staff development and research" (p 186).

The White Paper also recommended new locally based structures, the Local Adult Learning Boards (LALBs), in recognition "that provision is currently fragmented, lacks a strategic area-based approach and is under-resourced; and that the ad hoc Adult Education Boards have not been successful in addressing needs" (p 192). In its response to the Green Paper, *Making an Impact*, AONTAS noted that the Adult Education Boards operate inconsistently across the country because of a lack of autonomy and decision-making powers, no budget apart from ALCES, and a narrowness of representation from the stakeholders involved in adult education (p 24). AONTAS strongly lobbied for the LALBs to have:

- autonomy
- their own budgets
- decision-making powers

On January 16th, 2002, the Minister of State announced the establishment of the National Adult Learning Council to take effect from March 2002. This is possibly the most significant development ever in the history of the adult education service and presents those involved with an exciting and challenging opportunity. The Minister announced staffing plans for the Council which will presumably mean the establishment of the Technical Units proposed within the Paper. Their functions include supporting the development of the service at local level. A priority therefore will be the establishment of the Local Adult Learning Boards. The purpose of this discussion paper is to explore the issues and concerns raised by stakeholders in relation to the Local Adult Learning Boards, and to contribute to a debate on their development *before* they are established. The discussion Paper focuses on three main areas as follows:-

- role and responsibilities of the LALBs
- representative structure of the LALBs
- operational processes of the LALBs

Role and Responsibilities of the LALBs

The White Paper states that there was widespread agreement with the view propounded in the Green Paper that:-

> *"effective local structures for co-ordination of adult education should recognise the need for a multiplicity of providers and allow statutory and voluntary providers to work in harmony and partnership to meet local needs."*

Principles and Terms of Reference

The White Paper recommends the principles that should underpin the operation of the LALBs as:

- Area-based planning;
- Social inclusion and community development;
- Access, quality, relevance and progression;
- Partnership;
- Integration;
- Information;
- Flexibility;
- Voluntary effort; and
- Devolved authority.

In addition, the LALBs will be required to ensure parity of esteem between the different interest groups, and that each member of the board has full and equal status (Section 10.3.5, p 195).

The terms of reference of the LALBs will be to:

- Establish the level of Adult Education needs in their region;
- Develop an integrated action plan at local level to meet these needs, ensuring full complementarity with training and education services provided by other bodies;
- Promote and develop a comprehensive information service regarding the full range of services available locally;
- Promote the co-ordination and complementarity of developments in regard to the Employment Services and the evolution of the Adult Educational Guidance Service;
- Be responsible for the co-ordination of the work of participating bodies at local level;
- Facilitate the targeting of Adult Education resources on area priorities in the context of an agreed lifelong learning strategy;
- Promote equality of participation, benefit and outcome from Adult Education for participants from under-represented groups, particularly people with disabilities and travellers, and monitor progress in this area;
- Decide on the deployment of Adult Education resources within the education sector on the basis of agreed national criteria;
- Promote and support the development of Community Education provision, and the development of partnerships between the community and voluntary and statutory sectors;
- Provide organisational, administrative, professional and financial support to Adult Education services in the area; and
- Report annually to the National Adult Learning Council on the delivery of services in the region (Section 10.3.2, pp 192-193).

The White Paper states that the term of office of the Boards will be 3 years' duration or such periods as may be co-terminous with the life of the VEC. The boards will be required to meet at least 4 times per year (Section 10.3.6, p 196) The White Paper recommended that LALBs be established within the provisions of Section 21 of the Vocational Education Act (1930), as statutory sub-committees of the VEC (Section 10.3.4, p 194). The Vocational Education (Amendment) Bill,2000 makes provision for such subcommittees (Section 27.3) The LALBs would act as autonomous sub-committees which are administratively hosted by the VEC, and where the VEC also provides a technical service as an employer of additional staff appointed to the Boards (Section 10.3.4, p 195). AONTAS believes that the establishment of the LALBs in statute is an essential part of ensuring their authority, independence and autonomy.

With regard to their terms of reference, while the development of an integrated action plan implies a strategic role for the LALBS,the White Paper

appears to place a stronger emphasis on an operational role at local level. The emphasis on strategic planning needs to become much stronger underpinning the operational processes which is the role of a strong staff team. Evaluation processes are not specified in the terms of reference, and even the annual report to the National Adult Learning Council concerns the delivery of services rather than an evaluation of the effectiveness of those services.

The White Paper states that LALBs will develop an integrated action plan at local level to meet the Adult Education needs, ensuring full complementarity with training and education services provided by other bodies(Section 10.3.2,p192. The LALBs will also have a key role in ensuring a co-ordinated area based input in respect of adult education into the strategic plans developed by the County/City Development Boards(Section 10.5,p 199). Given that the CDBs are already completing their strategic plans and the LALBS have not yet been established it is vital that the CDBs incorporate the future action plans of the new LALBs into their strategy. It is also essential that they recognise the expertise of the LALBs in the area of adult education. The incoherence of timeframe for the establishment of both structures has created problems for the development of a synergy between the CDBs and the LALBs. However many local providers of adult and community education have already made inputs to the strategic plans of the CDBs using the structures currently in place. In order to develop the much needed coherence in the adult education service at local level, the establishment of the local boards must be a key priority for the NALC.

Funding Responsibilities

The White Paper recommends that the LALBs will have authority to make decisions on the deployment of resources within each region in regard to designated programmes within the further education sector in accordance with:-

- The national standards prescribed by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
- The standards and guidelines for good practice and the national policies prescribed by the National Adult Learning Council
- The framework for accountability, provision, policy, quality and resources set out by the Department of Education and Science (Section 10.3.4, p 195).

The White Paper envisages that existing services currently under the remit of the VEC, or of individual schools, will continue to be funded on that basis into the future, but that LALBs will have a key role in determining the priorities for;-

- Deployment of funds under the Community Education budget;
- Allocation of resources under the Special Initiatives for Disadvantaged Adults Scheme;

- Determination of priorities for expansion of places under the Back to Education Initiative; and
- Overseeing the Adult Educational Guidance Service as it emerges (Section 10.3.8, p 196).

Funding will be allocated to the relevant providers on the basis of an annual area plan submitted by the LALB to the Department of Education and Science, and in the case of over-arching services such as guidance, staff development, SPIDAS, community education, funds will be allocated to the VECs on a technical basis for deployment locally in accordance with the recommendations of the LALBs (Section 10.3.8, p 197).

Given that the lack of funding available to the Ad Hoc Adult Education Boards was one of their greatest restrictions,a clear role, in relation to the funding responsibilities of the LALBs is essential. There is some confusion in the White Paper as to what powers the LALBs will have in disbursing monies. The LALBs terms of reference state that they will ***decide on the deployment of Adult Education resources*** within the education sector, that they will ***facilitate the targeting of Adult Education resources on area priorities***, and that ***they will provide financial support to Adult Education services in the area*** (Section 10.3.2, p 193). In Section 10.3.4, p 195, the White Paper states that the Boards will have ***authority to make decisions*** *on the* deployment of resources within each region in regard to designated programmes within the further education sector.

Later in the Paper, it is stated that existing services which are currently the remit of the VEC, or of individual schools, will continue to be funded on that basis in the future, but that the LALBs will have a key role in ***determining the priorities*** for a limited range of programmes (Section 10.3.8, pp 196-197). It further states that funding will be allocated to relevant providers *by the Department of Education and Science* on the basis of an annual area plan submitted by the Board, but in the case of over-arching services such as guidance, staff development, SPIDAS, community education, ***funds will be allocated to the VECs on a technical basis for deployment locally*** in accordance with the recommendations of the LALBs (ibid).

The White Paper seems to recommend in principle that the LALBs have the autonomy to deploy resources, but in practice, their power is restricted to determining priorities and making recommendations on the basis of which resources will be allocated by the Department and the VECs. Section 10.3.8, pp 196-197, on funding, provides a very specific list of programmes for which the LALBs will have a key role in determining priorities, including deployment of funds under the Community Education budget, allocation of resources under SPIDAS, determination of priorities for expansion of places under the Back to Education Initiative, and for overseeing of the Adult Education guidance service as it emerges. This list raises several questions:

- Does the "Community Education budget" refer to ALCES or does it refer to the funding earmarked for Community Education from the Back to Education Initiative? If the latter, then why wont the LALBs be allowed to

allocate the ALCES budget as the existing *ad hoc* Adult Education Boards do?

- What is meant by determination of priorities for *expansion* of places under the Back to Education Initiative? Does it mean that LALBs will have no responsibility for existing BTEI places, only expanded places? The splitting of the programme in this way makes little sense and will lead to further fragmentation.

The Green Paper states that one of the criticisms of the existing *ad hoc* Adult Education Boards related to "the degree of decision-making which can be exercised by the boards regarding the deployment of resources" (Section 8.7, p 118). The recommendations as set out in the White Paper effectively give the Local Adult Learning Boards ***less*** authority to deploy resources than currently held by the *ad hoc* Adult Education Boards. By not allowing the LALBs real autonomy over the deployment of resources, it removes decision-making on funding one level away from the local provider groups, making it less representative.

2.1 Proposed Representative Structure of Local Adult Learning Boards

The White Paper recommends that Local Adult Learning Boards should include:

- Four representatives nominated by the community and voluntary pillar, including Travellers and disability interests;
- One representative from each of the training agencies, FÁS, Teagasc and CERT;
- One representative nominated by each of the school sectors in the area – vocational, secondary, and community/comprehensive;
- One representative each from the Teachers' Union of Ireland and the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland;
- One representative of learners;
- Two representatives from employers;
- One representative nominated by ICTU;
- One representative of the Area Partnership;
- Two representatives of the VEC;
- One representative of the County/City Development Board;
- One representative of the Library Service;
- One representative from the adult literacy service;
- One representative of the health boards;
- One representative of the Institutes of Technology, where there is such provision in the Board's catchment area;
- One representative of the university sector where there is such provision in the Board's catchment area (Section 10.3.3, p 194).

In addition, the area Education Officers/Adult Education Officers will be *ex-officio* members of the LALBs. The Chief Executive Officer of the VEC may attend *ex-officio* any meeting of the LALB (Section 10.3.5, p 195).

As recommended in the White Paper, each Local Adult Learning Board would consist of 25 members and two or three *ex-officio* members.

The White Paper states that "members of the boards would be chosen for their expertise and involvement in the field of Adult Education and training" (Section 10.3.2, p 193). The key principle for the development of a pro-active and effective Local Adult Learning Board, and for allowing them to fulfil their functions, is the involvement of local stakeholders. The composition of the LALBs, however, mirrors that of NALC. AONTAS questions the appropriateness of using the social partnership model, although workable at a national level for the composition of a locally-based and locally active board. While the intention is that the most comprehensive range of stakeholders is included the number of members seems far too large and unwieldy for a committee with such operational functions.

It is revealing that the White Paper specifies a quorum for the board as consisting of 8 members (Section 10.3.6, p 196) instead of the usual half of the membership plus one. It is felt that this is an acknowledgement that the board will infrequently work with a full quota of members. If the proposed representative structure is implemented, then much thought will need to be given to its operational processes.

Community Representation

The proposed composition of the LALBs allows for four representatives of the community and voluntary sector, two of which are specified as representing Travellers and disability interests. This leaves two places to represent the interests of the diverse and numerous community groups which exist in each region.

There is a lack of clarity about how the community representatives would be nominated for membership. The proposed structure states that they would be nominated by the community and voluntary pillar If the recommendation means the Community Pillar which operates at national level, this proposal is unworkable since the community pillar is not a locally based representative structure with a remit for adult and community education . The White Paper states further on that nominations can be made for membership through "appropriate networks" set up under the Community Fora (Section 10.3.7, p 196). AONTAS supported this approach in its response to the White Paper.

Some confusion has arisen in relation to Community Fora since the term is currently understood to refer to the fora which have been feeding into the strategic planning processes of the CDBs. These fora represent a very broad range of issues and groups. However the fora suggested by the White Paper is quite specific. It recommends that the LALBs will be required to formally convene local community fora through which the views of a wide range of

interest [groups] can be channelled. The fora should be convened by way of public meeting to which all interest groups with a role in Adult Education should be invited. This should include schools, Community and Adult Education groups, youth, adult literacy, welfare, health, employment centres, and training agencies. Appropriate networks should also be established where necessary through which:

- Nominations can be made for membership of the LALBs;
- The needs of specific groups such as Travellers and people with disabilities can be progressed (Section 10.3.7, p 196).

The Community Fora have the potential to be a worthwhile and interesting method of canvassing local issues and ensuring that all community groups can participate in the processes of the LALBs. It is important that the views of the fora be represented to the LALBs, and equally that the processes and plans of the LALBs be clearly communicated to the fora. The Community Education Facilitators will have a key role to play in this respect. However, as new workers in the sector they are going to need time , training and support to establish themselves. The Community Education Technical Unit has been designated a function in this regard. AONTAS in its capacity as representative of many of the key players in the field of community education, and with its track record of supporting community-based groups is well placed to play a key role as part of the unit.

Learner Representation

On the question about the inclusion of a representative of learners on the Local Adult Learning Boards, there is a major concern regarding how the learner will represent such a large and varied group of people, and how the learner representative would be chosen. While the intention is to be inclusive of participants, having one learner representative is not the most effective way to do this. The work of the community based groups in particular is rooted in the needs of adult learners and they have the capacity and the expertise to convey issues relating to learners to the Board. Group representatives will most likely have become involved as adult learners and are well aware of the issues affecting their learning. Alternatively AONTAS is well placed to voice the concerns of adult learners across a range of issues because of its representative role, its research and consultation processes which are well established. Making use of this expertise would be a much more effective way of representing learners.

Although most organisations and providers in the Adult Education sector are satisfied to have the LALBs hosted under the VEC, there is some concern, particularly among community-based education groups, that the VEC structure has historically not been inclusive of their needs. The establishment of the LALBs as statutory sub-committees, and the support provided by the Community Education support unit of the National Adult Learning Council and the employment of Community Education Facilitators should ease these concerns.

Operational Processes

The White Paper states that ultimately, for LALBs to be effective, they will need to have access to a range of supports which include guidance, programme and staff development, technical support, literacy and community education facilitation staff, working in each area as part of an Adult Education team. This issue will be progressed in the light of the outcomes of the comprehensive review of the professional and administrative staffing levels in VECs (Section 10.6, p 199). However, the White Paper does specify that the VECs will provide accounting and technical services to the Local Adult Learning Boards (Section 10.3.8, p 197), that the VECs will be allocated funds to support the networking and operational costs of the LALBs (Section 10.3.9, p 197), and that the VEC will also provide a technical service as an employer of additional staff appointed to the Boards (Section 10.3.4, p 195).

Thirty-three of the proposed new Adult Education Organisers will be appointed to the LALBs on "a flexible needs basis, to be deployed in accordance with the priorities identified by the Boards" (Section 10.4, p 198). The White Paper also proposes to appoint a national team of 35 Community Education Facilitators, based in the LALBs, to coordinate and support Community Education in their local areas (Section 5.6, p 114).These facilitators will be employed early in 2002.

It is important that to maintain their independence and guarantee their effectiveness that LALBs be properly staffed and resourced. AONTAS, in its response to the Green Paper suggested that:-

> *"A number of crucial service areas have been identified within the Green Paper relating to access to Lifelong Learning for adults. These include literacy provision, guidance and counselling, training and capacity-building for community-based groups, curriculum development, accreditation and progression and professionalisation. The AEO needs therefore to co-ordinate a staff team with expertise in these service areas. As a basic minimum such a team would include a Literacy Co-ordinator, Guidance and Information Officer, A Community Resource Worker, A Staff Development Officer and an Administrator.....*
>
> *Depending on the needs of the local area, the staff team would be identified accordingly. The AEO would be responsible for his or her staff team. The staff team would have clearly defined job descriptions and appropriate conditions of employment to ensure development of the service. They must have access to professional training and support to enable them to carry out their functions effectively."*

Since making this response Adult Literacy Organisers have been recruited, a number of pilot guidance projects have been established and Community Education Facilitators are about to be recruited. Resources need to continue to be made available to build on this core team. With regard to the 33 new

Adult Education Organisers, clarification is needed on whether they would be appointed to the Board or whether supporting the Board would only form a portion of their duties. A definition of "flexible needs basis" would also be helpful. If new staff are appointed to the VEC to support the LALBs, it is important to ensure that their time doesn't become consumed with other VEC work.

If the broad representation recommended in the White Paper is implemented then the LALBs will need to develop effective ways of working. They could operate a number of working groups which might correspond to the areas identified by the four technical units of NALC and then use the full board meeting to develop, oversee and evaluate the overall strategy. This model is similar to that of the Expert Working Groups proposed by the IVEA in its response to the Green Paper. (Pathways to Progress, P16.)

Relationship between National Adult Learning Council and the Local Adult Learning Boards

The White Paper recommends that the Adult Education and the Formal Education Sector Unit of the National Adult Learning Council will support Adult Education providers and the work of the Local Adult Learning Boards in terms of area planning, curriculum development, programme delivery and evaluation, and integration of provision (Section 10.2.4, p 188), and that the Workplace Learning Unit will support the establishment of education/training/workplace consortia through the work of the Local Adult Learning Boards (Section 10.2.4, p 189).

In return the White Paper states that Local Adult Learning Boards will report annually to the National Adult Learning Council on the delivery of services in the region (Section 10.3.2, p 193), and later that they will be required to submit an annual report for each year ended 31 December, and provide a copy to the VEC, a copy to the National Adult Learning Council and a copy to the Department of Education and Science (Section 10.3.9, p 197). The LALBs will use the standards and guidelines for good practice and the national policies prescribed by the National Adult Learning Council to make decisions on the deployment of resources in each area (Section 10.3.4, p 195).

Two of the extra 33 Adult Education Organisers which the Government proposes to employ will be assigned to the National Adult Learning Council. A particular part of their remit will be to play a national coordinating role in networking community, comprehensive and secondary schools and in ensuring a democratic and streamlined framework for representation of these sectors in the work of the Local Adult Learning Boards, and that of Council (Section 10.4, p 198).

The relationship between the National Adult Learning Council and Local Adult Learning Boards as described in the White Paper needs to be strengthened. It is essential that there are clear links to and support from the National Adult Learning Council for the LALBs. The NALC must provide a national

framework for quality and policy under which the LALBs will operate, but with the flexibility to allow them to apply the framework locally. Support for the LALBs will be an important factor in the work of the NALC, but it must also provide strategic and planning guidance. The role of the VECs needs also to be clarified in this respect.

The LALBs also need to be able to contribute to the development of national policy and strategic planning. It is important that national policy is informed by local practice. The roles of the technical units of NALC appear to be designed to establish links between the local and national structures. However they appear quite tenuous and will need to be developed much more fully in practical terms. Mechanisms need also to be put in place to allow LALBs to link with each other in order to promote cross-regional co-operation and the sharing of best practice. The notion of a consultative forum as proposed by the Kenny Report is worth examining in this regard.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The White Paper states that LALBs will be required to submit an annual report for each year ended 31 December, and provide a copy to the VEC, a copy to the NALC and a copy to the Department of Education and Science. This should document the overall provision by programme in the area, provide a profile of participants, and report on the key developments. The LALBs will also co-ordinate the provision of performance indicators on a quarterly basis on the delivery of services in their areas (Section 10.3.9, p 197).

It is very important for local providers to be assured of the transparency of the LALBs in their functions and processes. One way to guarantee this is for LALBs to develop plans with clearly defined targets and mechanisms of qualitative evaluation, which are reported on annually. An over-arching strategic plan which includes broad objectives and specific and measurable targets is crucial to ensure accountability. The reports required by the LALBs as specified in the White Paper are more functional in purpose and don't seem to involve much self-evaluation.

The reporting lines of the LALBs seem unclear in the White Paper. It is important that as sub-committees, the LALBs report annually to the VECs. It is possible that an annual report to the NALC would be used in compiling a nation-wide summary of the activities of LALBs by the NALC for forwarding to the Department of Education and Science. The need for LALBs to report directly to the Department is less necessary. Their work should be contained within the reports of either the VECs or the NALC. Importantly, the White Paper doesn't state to whom the LALBs should submit their report, only that copies must be sent to the VEC, NALC and the Department. There is no mention of the LALBs providing a copy of their annual report to the Community Fora although this would further progress the transparency of processes.

The recent announcement by the Minister of State of the establishment of NALC is a welcome initiative. The establishment of the Council is a first step in developing a coherent structure. The logical next step is the establishment of the LALBs. It is essential that all involved in adult education provision grasp this opportunity and move forward. AONTAS would welcome the views of its members on the issues raised in this paper and will endeavour to ensure that they are conveyed to the relevant bodies.

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